

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Interesting perspectives on the agriculture only farm bill

They did it. On Thursday, July 11, 2013, the US House of Representatives passed an agriculture-only farm bill on a mostly 216-208 party-line vote—all of the Democrats voted “no” along with 12 Republicans. Just what that will mean for a conference committee with the Senate, whose bill includes a nutrition title, is unclear at this time. In addition to eliminating the nutrition title, the House bill eliminates the 1938 and 1949 farm bills as permanent legislation. Just this last January, the possibility of reverting to the permanent legislation if the 112th Congress did not adopt a farm bill forced a last minute partial one-year extension of the 2008 Farm Bill.

Rather than speculate about what Congress might do with respect to farm and nutrition policy, we want to share four reactions to the actions of the House.

In response to the House vote, the White House Office of Management and Budget released a Statement of Administration Policy that reads, “the Administration strongly opposes H.R. 2642, the Federal Agriculture Reform and Risk Management Act of 2013.... The 608 page bill... does not contain sufficient commodity and crop insurance reforms and does not invest in renewable energy, an important source of jobs and economic growth in rural communities across the country. Legislation as important as a Farm Bill should be constructed in a comprehensive approach that helps strengthen all aspects of the Nation.

“This bill also fails to reauthorize nutrition programs, which benefit millions of Americans—in rural, suburban and urban areas alike. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is a cornerstone of our nation’s food assistance safety net, and should not be left behind as the rest of the Farm Bill advances.

“If the President were presented with H.R. 2642, his senior advisors would recommend that he veto the bill.”

Michael Dimock takes a different perspective from his colleagues on the California Food Policy Council who fear that splitting the farm bill in two will sink support for the nutrition title. He writes (<http://civileats.com/2013/07/12/a-game-changer-for-the-farm-bill-and-snap/>), “they miss the fact that it signals an end to an old alliance that kept change from happening. Without that roadblock, a united food movement may be able to push for farm and food policies that will actually support food justice, rural renewal, human health and community resilience instead of lining the pockets of the nation’s most powerful factory farms and food corporations....

“For nearly thirty years agribusiness and big food

have lobbied to support SNAP. But they did it to ensure that the hunger lobby supported subsidies for corn, soy, wheat, rice and sugar. The biggest growers reap most of the subsidies. They supply the raw materials of the industrial food system. By enriching the largest farmers, we also enrich the industrial food complex comprised of banks, insurance, GMO seed, chemical and industrial food corporations that churn out cheap, highly processed and fast food that undermines public health....

“Twenty-first century policies must acknowledge that healthy food and farms form the foundation for secure, prosperous and healthy communities. A new nutrition policy must provide low-income people easy and affordable access to nutritious food and commit resources to teach children and young families the skills and knowledge essential to food production, preparation, nutrition, and enjoyment.

“Agriculture policy must make more money available to protect soil, water, and biological diversity and prevent the exploitation of workers and animal cruelty. The next Farm Bill must aim to prevent any corporation or individual from controlling farmers, ranchers, genes and markets. The challenges of climate change and obesity require aid to farmers and ranchers harmed by flood and drought as well as support for beginning farmers and projects that build sustainable regional food supply systems that make nutritious fresh food available all across the nation.

“Such policies would make agriculture relevant to every American: rich or poor, urban or rural.”

Todd Neely, in a DTN article reports that Agriculture Committee Ranking Member Colin Peterson said, “I don’t see a clear path forward from here. There has been no assurance from the Republican leadership that passing this bill will allow us to begin to conference with the Senate in a timely manner. In fact, the Republican leadership has told agricultural groups to support this bill as the way to go to conference, while also telling Republican members, fearful of the wrath of conservative groups’ opposition, that there will be no conference, at least not without first getting concessions from the Senate; concessions the Senate will never agree to.

“Maybe the chairman has received assurances from his leadership that should this bill pass, they will let us move expeditiously to a conference with the Senate and begin negotiations. I have received no assurance this would be the case and, unfortunately, the majority’s past performance does not inspire much

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confidence.”

National Corn Growers Association President Pam Johnson wrote the House before its vote saying, “the farm bill affects every American; those who eat and those who produce. We view the proposed actions to be taken on the floor of the House today with disappointment. Legislation that for decades has been a bright spot for how our Congress should work—in a bipartisan, bicameral manner—is now stuck in a morass of petty bickering and political gamesmanship. We do not believe that the link between farm programs and nutrition programs should be severed. We see benefits beyond the political in keeping the ties between those who produce food and those who need it....

“While we disagree with the policies of the legislation and are dismayed with the process that leads us to this sad situation, we see no other way to move the farm bill to a conference with the Senate unless the House approves the bill before it today....

“However, our action in no way reflects our approval of its contents or the manner in which it came to the floor. Unless significant change is made to the bill in the conference committee, we will strongly urge its rejection by the Senate and the House.”

The days between now and the August recess will undoubtedly prove to be interesting and challenging as various players in the farm bill debate maneuver for advantage.

It would not be surprising if Congress goes beyond a second expiration of the 2008 Farm Bill on September 30.

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